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Underbelly Press



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Taken by L. Huddleston

Editor's note

It feels peculiar to say that Underbelly Press has been around for over a year now. It makes me wonder what it will look like in another year's time and how strange it is, really, how fast time goes. The past year has taught me so much; it's been an invaluable experience working with so many stellar writers and artists.

Issue 5 marks a special milestone, our very first themed edition. Its focus is autumn, a season of change and reflection. For this issue, I've blended together Underbelly's focus on gritty, human experience with the natural decay and shift of the season. These pieces explore that intersection, the rot beneath the surface, the quiet unravelling, the weight of change, the season of letting go. I've never been a fan of change, so finding beauty in it, in melancholy and decay, has been striking. I've curated a collection of pieces that I hope capture what Underbelly is about, a space for the raw, the human, the mundane.

Putting this issue together has been a privilege. It's a testament to the writers and artists who've trusted us with their work, and to the readers who continue to find meaning in what we share. Thank you for being part of this.

May this issue remind you that there is beauty in the mundane.

Warm regards and gratitude,



Lucy Huddleston, Editor-in-Chief

Warning

This magazine contains some sensitive content including mental health issues, physical health issues, suicide, and death.

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Taken by GP Hyde

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Taken by L. Huddleston

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SHORT FICTION



Taken by L. Huddleston

AMY LEACY

Letting Go

As the summer heat died, I departed from my body. Swiftly, in the blink of an eye, I was gasping for breath; a second later, I was staring at my dull eyes. I marvelled at my stillness, the utter silence. I reached out to touch my lifeless skin. Nothing. Moments prior, I had been cold, desperately trying to feel the warmth of the air around me. I forced myself to be still, wondering if I could feel either of those things now. Nothing. I peered through the curtains at the vanishing light of the sky, at the trees on the horizon, their branches heavy and aching with leaves. Leaves that would fall and wither. Shrinking away from the window, I huddled next to my body. Neither of us gained any warmth.

I drifted through my home, staring listlessly at clothes I could not wear, at the TV I could not turn on, the food I could not eat. I fancied that I should put the perishables in the freezer, preserve them for the future. Yet, try as I might, I couldn't pick up a single thing; every time I tried, I would pass through the item hopelessly. I studied the mirrors and any other reflective surfaces, but I could no longer see my reflection. Come back, I begged myself. I peered into the bathroom, leaving quickly before the *dripdripdrip* of the shower, and the black mould growing in the cracks of the tiles began to annoy me. Back down the corridor, I would cast a glance at the window, facing the cold autumn sun that would have once blinded me. Now, the rays simply passed through me, with no shadow cast on the increasingly dusty carpet. I didn't want to linger at the window. I didn't want to see the wind picking at the leaves, to see them scattered into nothingness.

Inevitably, I returned to my body. It was expanding, pale skin pulling, my features distorting. I looked ready to burst. I shivered, fixing my gaze on the swollen form, willing myself to remain whole. Outside, somewhere, conkers began to fall, spiky outer shells smashing to the ground, their insides becoming free pickings for scavenging walkers. The wind began to pick up, tapping against the windows. More leaves would be falling, like the ones we used to play in. I retreated into the house, into heat I could not feel, trying not to imagine what the smell must be like.

Despite my pleas, my skin ultimately split, oozing foul liquids. I watched helplessly as areas of flesh began to blacken, staining the bedsheets. At first, I had an urge to try and clean the mess, to scrub the rot away, even though I had already learned I could no longer handle solid objects. Still, I had to make the flesh look like me again. I went to the bathroom. The *dripdripdrip* continued in the shower, but other things had changed. The black mould was escaping the confines of the tile cracks, dark tendrils creeping across the walls. On the floor, an abandoned, damp towel was growing a fine patina of fluffy rot, which was fusing with the floor. And...were those mushrooms, beginning to poke through in the corners? Trembling, I backed out of the room.

I fled to the living room. There, at least, there was nothing to rot. I could pretend that there wasn't mould growing throughout the house, that flesh that I once inhabited wasn't leaking and withering into a vile mush. That mushrooms weren't growing upstairs. *Mushrooms*. As children, we had delighted in spotting mushrooms on the ground, pretending to pick them to scare the adults ('Stop messing with them, they're *poisonous*!'). As we grew, we tried to guess which ones would be the funny ones that would cause hallucinations ('Try one, I dare you!'). I wondered what the ones in the bathroom would do to a person. I shivered, but not unpleasantly.

Confused, I took a moment to work out what this was, before it hit me. I was laughing. At that, I laughed again. I realised I was facing the TV, one of the surfaces in which I'd searched for my reflection. Still, I saw nothing. This time, I didn't mind.

I had returned to the corpse in the bedroom. I looked at the decaying flesh, the flies hovering above as their young began to hatch within the rotten meat. It was no longer mine, that body. I tried to feel sad at the loss of it, but I was beyond this. I had grieved without even noticing. I sent a message to the flies, to the newly hatched maggots. I hope it serves you well.

The slivers of autumn sun shone through the window. I passed over the body, bidding it a final farewell. I glided to the window, passing through with astonishing ease. I let the wind take me, embracing the coolness. I rustled among the golden leaves, rolled the conkers along the ground. I glided over the mushrooms, wondering what flowers would replace them in the coming months. Some would be found easily, others, people would enjoy hunting. I intertwined with the emptying branches, casting off their old skin, readying to grow new blooms. I drifted languidly, becoming one with the sun, the rain, the land.

Go to the house, if you will. You won't find me there.

AMY LEACY is an editor for Northodox Press, a relatively new independent publisher. Amy lives in Sheffield with her husband and dog. She has always had a passion for books and reading, and working with writers has inspired her to start creating her own stories. Warning: expect macabre things here!

DENISE BAYES

Going Underground

Claude's heels click down the concrete stairs to the underpass. He is late for his shift. He pulls his coat tight, feeling the chill breath of October catching his throat. At the bottom, a young girl is banging a stick in time to his footsteps, her bright blue eyes smiling up at him. He chuckles.

"Bonsoir," he says to the child and the boy she is playing with. Together they are creating patterns on the ground, twisting sticks through the fallen leaves as though stirring a pot of soup. He pauses to admire the shapes they have created.

"Nikita! Come here."

The girl's blonde curls flip towards the woman at the entrance to the tunnel. She hovers close to a camping stove, her hands fluttering by the warmth of the flame. Other families are scattered around, fellow inhabitants of this underground world. A swirl of unfamiliar languages echoes around Claude.

He raises a hand in greeting to the woman, then rushes off to the restaurant.

Friday night is busy in the brasserie. Claude is polite as he balances trays laden with food through the tables of customers.

Local residents chatter on the red banquettes by the wall, while tourists take timid glances around the grandeur of the historic dining room. He notices the changes in orders tonight, customers wanting the warmth of Lyonnaise stews and rich red wines. And Friday is always full of celebrations. Ritual applause fills the room each time the antique organ rings out another chorus of “Happy Birthday.”

Seven candles light the cake he carries towards the table. The birthday girl smiles, stands to blow out her candles with precise puffs. Her mother bends down and kisses the child, her shiny chic bob flipping back into place. Claude cuts the cake and watches the birthday girl take a forkful of the creamy concoction.

“More cake, ma chérie?” her mother asks, but the girl shakes her blonde curls, pushes the slice away with a frown.

“Would you like to take the rest home, madame?” Claude asks.

Nobody replies to his question. They are focused now on the birthday girl opening a pile of glossily wrapped gifts. The cake is pushed aside, forgotten.

Claude carries it through the swing doors into the kitchen. He flips open the industrial bin, ready to scrape away the discarded sponge and cream.

Hesitates.

Resting the plate on a bench, Claude glances around to check no-one is watching. He wraps the cake in a fold of silver foil and slides the package to the back of his locker.

Frost is tinging the leaves on the pavement with silver when Claude leaves at the end of his shift. The wrapped parcel nestles deep in his coat pocket. He treads with care as he heads back down the steps to the underpass. Stale urine fills his nostrils while traffic roars around the ring road above them.

Ahead he sees a row of mattresses and sleeping bags stretching the length of the concrete tunnel. SnORES drift from the ground, heads burrowed in the search for warmth.

Claude spots a row of four blue padded worms. Blonde curls spring from the top of a small sleeping bag.

Bending down, he places the silver foil package close to the girl's head.

"Enjoy it, Nikita," he whispers.

"Merci, monsieur." A muffled voice floats up from the ground.

As Claude climbs the stairs back towards the busy streets, he glances down at the underground city this child calls home. Shivers up at the bone-white gaze of the Hunter's moon.

DEREK JENNINGS

Aubade Close

It was just before sunrise and the clay white sky was pushing up to the edges of pulled curtains and drawn blinds. Postie John was already up to a good pace and just turning into the fifth street on his post round. Aubade Close.

The little cul-de-sac presented itself to its first visitor of the new day. Eight identical bungalows on either side of the close and two more at the top. Built in the late '60s with most gardens still having the original roses and hydrangeas in them and the outdated décor to match inside. The demographic complemented the condition and the now decrepit little community continued to provide company, support and minor irritations to one another.

Postie John was a quiet, thoughtful man and was well suited to his job. He liked the close. It felt very peaceful today which amplified the dawn chorus that had been weakening from the summer. He much preferred being out here on his round than suffering the gobby sorting office at stupid o'clock. The low roofs gave it space and it had a nice rhythm of numbers to work around, one, three, five.

He started working door to door and was a good distance from the big Ash tree when a single falling seed pod spun down like a little helicopter to the ground in front of him. Anemochory. The summer was fading fast now.

A postman notices these subtle changes in the seasons, days shortening with every sunrise. A hedgehog crossed his path heading for long uncut grass. John felt a shiver, normally he liked these fresher days, the old folk referred to them quaintly as Hull Fair weather.

A few residents were early risers and he'd get waves from the elderly women and nods from the old men from some of the windows. He'd usually get both from the couple at number three but today it was just a hasty nod from old Philip.

He observed their age and the antiquation of the bungalow couture they all dressed in. Most still had mobility but some were bungalow bound. He liked to think they still lived in hope. Second bedrooms were made up with beds in anticipation of someone staying over, which hardly anyone ever did. Their hope was invested in their families with family photos proudly adorning walls. Seven, nine, eleven.

A blackbird sang in full voice, defiant and refusing to give up on the summer like the swallows had done. Thirteen, fifteen, seventeen.

The old folk did have their petty jealousies but liked to maintain a certain equality with each other. An enmeshed camaraderie.

The first rule of Bungalow Club was: you must maintain the pretence of austerity.

They insisted they were all impoverished pensioners lucky to live the mandated bungalow dream that had been sold to them. The postie saw through this façade as he was the one delivering the huge wads of bank statements to more than half the close.

It had been rife with carpetbaggers and these addresses were not always his best Christmas tippers either. Such irrational thrift!

Eighteen, sixteen, fourteen.

The many years lived of love and happiness and accumulated wealth in these bungalows could not stop the creep of loneliness and ill health though. Nothing ever can. Long lives lived behind four walls and almost seen, almost touched every day by him through letterboxes. Twelve, ten, eight.

Postie John had a habit of glancing back across to number three as he headed to exit the close for a second exchange of heartwarming smiling, nodding and waving.

Odd, the window was empty?

Philip had returned to their bedroom to discover his wife had passed away in the early hours. The end of a life no trick can dispel. He was still frozen in that uncomprehending moment before the first tear. They had been inseparable.

Six, four, two.

She'd gone.

As John worked his way up the next road he noted the second visitor of the day pass him and turn down the close. The doctor's car. The realization that something was wrong. That split moment of eye contact with Philip now imprinted in his head.

Postie John never saw these bungalows negatively or their residents as reduced. He saw the close as a pantheon for people who had lived good lives and he ruminated on what would survive of them.

It would be love.

EMYR PAYNE

Key Worker

I wake up at 6am. It's light outside but it won't be for long. I hate this time. My chest feels tight and my stomach is hard. I stand up and look around. There are shadows on the walls and I don't think I am going to make it. But the sun is still up and there's coffee in the cupboard.

I don't stay long. If I stay too long I won't make it. So I drink my coffee and shit into the toilet, then flush twice to get rid of the evidence. Once I stand up I need to go again but I push the feeling away. I grab my scrubs and put them in my bag. They smell like Chipsticks but I think I'll get away with it. I open the door and step outside. The sun is pink and the sky is grey.

Intrusive thoughts of death and disaster get me through. As I drive along the motorway I imagine swerving into the lane and clipping the barriers just enough to cause a minor collision. I run the telephone call through in my head.

Boss: Hello?

Me: Hello?

Boss: David, is that you?

Me: Yes, it's me.

Boss: Where are you? You're thirty minutes late.

Me: I'm in hospital.

Boss: No you're not. That's where you're supposed to be.

Me: No, really. I'm a patient.

Boss: You're a patient?

Me: Yes.

Boss: What kind of patient?

Me: I crashed my car on the way to work and now I've got whiplash.

Boss: Why did you do that?

Me: So I could tell you this.

Boss: What?

Me: I'm not coming in.

I come off at junction seven unharmed and slow down at the traffic lights. I can see the hospital on the right and my heart starts pumping like mad. My mouth goes dry and I think finally, this is it. I am ready to die. I push my foot down on the accelerator and hope for the best.

I pull into the car park and look up at the building that houses my income. There is barbed wire along the top of the gate and security cameras move when I move. I step outside and walk into my destiny. The receptionist stands behind a Perspex screen and hands me my keys.

In the airlock I contemplate my future. I am standing between two doors and I hear one of them click behind my ear as it locks. My heart is slowing down now and the long corridor into the gym stretches on in front of my eyes.

I sit on the bench in the changing room. There is a loud clanking noise coming from the wall behind me. I look up at the shower door and see white sticky labels on the wall with different names written on them in green and red ink. I know them all and suddenly I don't feel so alone.

I get changed as slowly as I can. The sun is getting hot behind the window. The summer is pulling out all the stops before it dies. And I am starting to lose my mind. I can feel it in my temples. But I am going to be alright.

When my scrubs are on I feel light. Like a sheet in the wind. A ghost sweeping down the corridor at night. I clip my alarm onto the elastic waist and hold the keys in my hand. I don't want to let go.

As I walk back down the corridor there is a leaf on the floor. I see it there on the side, pushed into the wall. The leaf is yellow and brown with raised ridges like crinkle-cut crisps. The autumn is coming and I am worried. My chest starts beating again. I keep walking.

I tap my fob on the sensor and the door opens. I read the room. The ward is ready for something. There is a feeling in the walls. Like dying on Christmas Day. And I can feel it coming already. That thing that happens when the seasons change. That feeling that turns my brain into jelly. The kind you find between the meat and pastry in cheap pork pies.

That thing that opens up your life like a caesarean and pulls a giant jellyfish out of your belly. That thing that turns your life into a window covered in venetian blinds. That thing that turns your whole personality into an original painting by an unknown artist. That thing that drags you under into the lime inside the vodka. That thing that nobody knows about because you turn your face into a collage of all your favourite photographs of you. That thing that turns your life into time. And your time into a squashed cockroach in between two nail files.

I think about what the doctor said last year when he gave me the pills.

‘This always happens in winter.’

I open the nursing office door and read the board. I’m on first obs.

EMYR PAYNE is a nurse by day, writer at night and photographer on the weekend. His work has appeared in The Journal, Underbelly Press and shortlisted for the Apoetical poetry prize. You can learn more about his practice at www.emyr-payne.com and [@emyr_payne_writer_photographer](https://www.instagram.com/emyr_payne_writer_photographer).

HEATHER WALKER**Pit**

It was all I knew, the sound of the hooter from the mine. It marked my days. It was the clock I lived by. My father worked the early shift, coming home as black as the coal he worked with. When I was a young child, I thought he was two men, the sooty faced one, clothes stinking of coal dust, and the fresh faced one with pink skin. Every time he bathed, he became born again, like those Baptists up on Slate Hill. Yet however much my mother cleaned and washed, coal dust seemed to settle everywhere, especially on me.

I knew that when I left school, that's where I would be going. There was no other work in our town. Unless you made it to the grammar school, the mine was where you went. But I had a fear of the dark and a fear of being underground. My father said, 'You'll get used to it, son.' Now autumn was upon us. A time of endings while my working life was beginning. The trees stood as gritty smudges of black dust with blobs of yellow and red trying to break out. There was a cool wind winding its way through the town, whispering my name, and dread set upon me. My chest tightened when I thought about going below the earth. And then the nightmares began, screaming out in the early hours and waking everyone.

I walked with heavy feet beside my father that morning. My heart thumped harder the nearer we got to the pit.

There were some formalities to go through, and my father answered all the questions because I couldn't speak. My breathing became laboured and shallow. I heaved air into my lungs, but there wasn't enough. We walked with the rest of the gang to the cage. The stench of coal crept inside me as the cage rose from below. The door opened, and the previous gang stepped out, dirty faced and exhausted.

'Come on lad,' my father said. But I couldn't move. My father placed a hand on my shoulder. Every breath came in gulps, but it didn't help. Panic rose in me. I felt sick. Tears coursed down my cheeks. I was going to die here before I even made it down. 'Pull yourself together,' my father shouted. I dropped my lunch box, pulled off the helmet that seemed to drum me into the earth, and ran.

My lungs heaved as I hauled myself to the top of the hill, where I sank into the grass until I calmed down. I looked down on the town of my birth. The soot covered houses, a town with no colour, a town where washing smelt of coal more than air. Thoughts dug through the fog of my brain. I had shamed my father, my family. I was not the son to be proud of. So, I stood up and started walking. Out of the parish, out of the county. My heart was heavy, but I knew I could never go back. I would take my chances elsewhere. I shivered as day edged into evening. Below me stood a farm, a collection of barns set around a cottage. Smoke curled out of the chimney. The irony of it made me smile, but I kept walking towards it.

HEATHER WALKER is a writer of poetry and short fiction. Her work has appeared in Ink Sweat & Tears, Popshot, Banshee Lit and others. Her collection of flash fiction is available through Amazon and her latest book Tinsel Street has just been published by Troubador. Heather lives in London.

IAN JOHNSON

These People Get Found Out Eventually

Blythe, the new hire, turned up with two kids' worth of common ground and a wheelbarrow of opinions to disrupt The Library's coffee mornings. Penelope just sat there, joining in with her only relevant experience of once being a child, as a plug would to an electrician.

Weeks in, after Penelope's third attempt at an anti-anecdote about always being a precocious reader, the mood soured.

"How are your cats, Penny(!)?"

"Well, I only have Keats, now. Yeats died."

Her turncoat team moved on so flippantly that it winded Penelope into a tactical retreat to the stores. She checked on her books – the rare ones, her remit, unofficially. The faithful array of bindings lifted her heart, hinting at their provenance – their use, their pre-life. The leather armorial doorstops, embossed with the coat of arms of some gilded lineage, *ex libris*. The limp velum tracts, the pale calf skin flexed and bent from *recto* to *verso* with intricate stitched supports.

Her favourite pair were cloaked in vivid green cloth, a nineteenth-century process achieved through arsenic.

Penelope donned powdered nitrile gloves, tucking their spines in, ephemerally soothed.

Over those dreadful months, Blythe had the gall to bring in *systems*. How to *gauge* rarity. Descriptive *standards*. *Databases*. She suggested, then strongly suggested, those poison books needed to be quarantined. *Withdrawn. Health and Safety. Not worth the risk.*

The tension brought on migraines, which Penelope described to colleagues as clusters of headaches at a packed coffee morning.

“How many heads have you got?!” Blythe quipped.

The laughter.

Her guts.

The stores.

“These people get found out eventually,” Penelope’s late mother would have assured, reminding her not to be so “wearyingly biddable.”

The Library created a post for Blythe – Head of Rarities, officially. When the call for voluntary redundancy came around, Penelope put her hand up.

Nobody fought for her.

She wanted to take one, her favourite Moroccan goat hide *quarto* from the Romantics Collection, but Blythe’s barcoding would pick up on its absence.

She settled on the most handsome arsenic twin – the one with the gold fore-edge painting of sycamore leaves on its unfanned pages. She'd secreted it behind some encyclopaedias, cometh the shredding van. Such mutilation was too much to bear.

There was a card and a shop-bought cake at her last coffee morning.

Then, a wallowing.

And her savings dwindled.

And Keats the cat died.

“Such is life,” her late mother would have said.

Penelope didn't get beyond settling on the waxed canvas rolltop backpack with lemon piping in her resolve to finally travel, reluctantly applying for that Civil Service temp post the Job Centre foisted on her. She got it, divorced forever from her books, becoming reliable, trustworthy, dependable, then, fatally, permanent. A serviceable part of someone else's systems, estranged from her bindings and the incidental words they nipped together, except the trafficked emerald orphan, toxic pigments and all.

The coffee that morning was pumpkin spiced, the first of the season, which thrilled Penelope to the point she did a little squeak to herself.

The automatic door gasped wide for her. The smiley polyester baristas with thick arms and halo hair nets intercepted.

“Alreet, pet, what can I get you?”

“Pumpkin Spice latte, please,” Penelope exhaled, sliding over a loyalty card for her final stamp. It was free. She squeaked.

Penelope claimed the spoils with an oval mouthed *thank you*, turning to see *HER* in the corner booth, sobbing.

“Blythe?”

“Penelope. Hi,” Blythe gurned, wiping her nose with a balled tissue, thumbing the rim of a Cappuccino. A humane compulsion worked Penelope like a sock puppet, plonking her opposite.

“What’s the matter?”

“My husband, Gary,” Blythe sniffled, “You remember him? The absolute prick, he’s had a big go at me for green-lighting our loft extension. He doesn’t think I consulted him.”

“Gosh,” Penelope offered, thinking of her non-extendable rented apartment.

“It’s just... I told him, I did. Some people aren’t collaborative. And Gary’s got such a lack of emotional intelligence. I mean, *why* would I ask him, anyway? What is *he* going to contribute?”

“Gosh,” Penelope offered, thinking about systems.

Blythe’s mobile trilled. She scooped it up, taking the call outside, leaving her consoler taskless. Penelope watched the window pantomime. The gesticulation. The fury. The climb-down. The nodding.

That eye roll. That smirk.

She reached into her backpack, fingering the arsenic-laced spine of her constant companion, picking furiously at a loose strand, the creamy Cappuccino gaping, her dénouement narrowing.

She flicked.

The thread bobbed and sunk.

Blythe blustered inside. “He’s apologised! Crisis over!”

Penelope snapped rigid. Blythe cocked her evil head.

“Good to see you, Penny(!). I hope Keats... Yeats... the cats, I hope you’re all well.”

The door yawned her triumphant retreat, tainted drink undrunk.

Her brittle nemesis, vanquished anew, slumped in the void.

“That was dead canny of you, sitting with her,” the chubby barista screeched. “She looked proper upset.”

“She killed her children!” Penelope rallied, flat and white.

“You what?”

“Yes. She... poisoned them. Well, a... a gas leak.”

“What are you – ?”

“She’d gone for a coffee with her friends and left them... to tuck themselves in. And they died on account of a faulty pipe... a cluster of pipes, really, which she hadn’t overseen... systematically. She knew about it... suspected, anyway. She got off on a technicality.”

“Christ!”

“Eeee, y’know, I think I heard about that,” the barista’s partner in pastries stirred. “These people shouldn’t be allowed to have kids.”

“Well, I tell you what, she’s in here all the bloody time. The murdering prick’s not getting no Cappuccinos off me on a technicality.”

“Aye, me neither.”

“Ey, you wanna watch the company you keep, n’all. There’s such a thing as being *too* canny!”

Back on the cool of the pavement, Penelope pecked at the pumpkin foam, the sickly syrup flooding her senses like hot Calpol warmed and spooned to her by her late mother, who’d say “progress not perfection,” and let her wallow in niche comforts and small victories, never explaining the difference.

JOHN STOREY

Oh! I do like to be beside the seaside!

Stephen looked out of the small window at the children playing on the beach below, their voices drifting up like a rumour that something good might happen. There were adults too, perhaps also wondering where childhood had gone and occasionally being reminded of what was not yet lost.

There were fewer people now than he had watched in the summer. If this had been a weekday, the beach would have been almost empty but for a few people with dogs and others walking alone. He knew that something was ending. He could see that, but he was still unable to see benign mists and mellow fruitfulness. Falling leaves and the thought of harvesting led him only to the cold darkness of winter, and without the hope of spring.

He'd listened to music and tried to read a magazine, but mostly, between small meals, he'd observed the fading world of the beach from his window. At times what he saw became little more than muted colours intermingling in a slow dance of sadness and decay.

On Friday afternoon he had said goodbye to his workmates, and they had all wished each other a wonderful weekend; the wonder being the escape it offered from the mind-numbing meniality of their employment; and on Friday evening he had chatted very briefly with a cashier at the supermarket.

He had not spoken to anyone on Saturday or today and nor did he expect to speak to anyone until back at work on Monday.

But he could go to a pub tonight. He probably had enough money for an hour or two, and there might be someone there he knew or someone there he could get to know. These small possibilities caused him to breathe heavily upon the glass. Without thinking, he drew a love heart on the window pane and smiled the smile of someone who knows that most things are out of reach.

He opened the window to listen, and he wondered again what it was that seemed to predict this moment, and again he asked himself how his isolation had first started and how he'd never been able to prevent it taking hold of his life. All he seemed to know, and he knew it with devastating banality, was that if you were poor at the seaside it was not like being on holiday.

He closed the window and gathered together the tablets he had accumulated over recent months. He removed a bottle of mineral water from the almost empty fridge. The last thing was to write the note, but it was so hard to know what to say.

As he began to drift, he remembered the hopeless streets of imposed obscurity, where choices were always limited, and where no memory of possibility seemed to exist with people constantly engaged in the struggle for now, making the past and future harmlessly invisible. What he remembered as he faded was a long way from his lost dream of the seaside.

JOHN STOREY is an award-winning author of fourteen academic books, some existing in multiple editions, translated into nineteen languages. *To Fetch a Pail of Water* is his second novel. He is currently working on a collection of short stories called *Northern Gothic: The Future of the Past*.

JUPITER JONES

Tired and Ravenous

It began with a steak bake. After dropping off her dry cleaning, she ate it in the street, chowing down outside the shop, cramming in pastry flakes and mechanically recovered meat. Two more in a greasy paper bag for later. She was ravenous.

As the leaves turned, she tried to sate her new hunger with brioche, cheese, blueberries, charcuterie. And salmon, any amount of salmon. Pan-fried, oven-baked, *en papillote*, grilled, poached, smoked, salmon *carpaccio*, then, to be honest, just raw. At first, she felt ashamed – about the eating. The manner of the eating. Head in one hand, tail gripped in the other. She gnawed and guzzled, slurping on the succulent parts. She ate crouched on the kitchen floor, blinds closed, or outside, under the trees, leaves cascading, a veil, getting caught in her hair.

Her calorie intake skyrocketed. Pilates was out of the question. She didn't look fat, but she was sleek, buttery. She developed a rolling gait. Like slow dancing.

The weather grew colder. Almost bare now, the trees rattled in the wind.

She felt a change, a growing wildness, and a hankering to be undisturbed. Time was ripening.

One morning, she woke to find her lawn crisp and lightly frosted. After breakfasting on porridge, sticky with honey and cream, then muffins, half-a-dozen eggs, a smoked trout, and a double espresso to combat the leaden weight of a creeping narcolepsy, she made the necessary preparations. She sent out emails: notice with immediate effect, membership cancellations, bills paid up until spring. Finally, overcoming her scruples, she reached into the back of the wardrobe for the coat. Her godmother's coat, an unwanted bequest of dark fur, real and almost full length. Her snout wrinkled. The coat had a faint odour of mothballs and Dior. And something else, like moss or lichen. She shrugged it on.

Yawning, she locked the house and drove to the mountains.

JUPITER JONES lives in Wales and writes short fictions. She is the author of three novellas-in-flash, including *Gull Shit Alley* and *Other Roads to Hell* and is currently working on a PhD on the novella-in-flash, but has wasted most of the summer watching wasps eat all the pears.

L. DUTHIE

Beneath the Sun

It came as a signed for delivery. DPD Ian hoisted it up the two small steps where, despite the sign that said ‘*Please mind the steps*’, people often tripped because they were preoccupied. Ian was as rushed as ever. He told me he’d already done sixteen and was getting too old for this, but he still had his usual grin. I did the signature, told him to leave it by the magnets and he nodded before saying, “Ta. Hope it’s not too busy for yer t’day, Mables.”

Peak season at Tonnau Rhydd, which means Free Waves – or close to – was always busy. I’d only worked here since the start of summer after The Castle closed down. Coming from late-night shifts to Tonnau had been what Aunt Bernie would have called a *bit of a change*, and it had been, but some things were the same. People. So many of them, all shapes and dialects but mostly moral types who liked to impart their wisdom about two things. Art, which we had, and money, which we didn’t. Nevertheless, Emily, Tonnau’s owner, always loved it when they came in, telling me to chat and show them the side shelf, allocated for more high-value items such as sculptures and moody oils.

The day the parcel came was right at the end of the season. We’d already had notice of two weeks until autumn closure. The arrival of this thing, whatever it was, was late and would unlikely be sold unless it was something spectacular.

As I opened the box, a note flipped out in cursive font:

Please find my latest piece;

‘The Luminance’

I have enclosed instructions for payment and I will be in touch regarding my visit next year.

Best,

Gerald J. Vickerson.

Placing the note on the counter, I lifted it from its box. Unravelling the bubble wrap revealed a sundial with an intricate design. It had a face that looked like a gargoyle which I assumed was supposed to be a man, probably Gerald himself. I’d already been instructed to side-shelf it so I carried it over to the space I’d made beside the driftwood set. It glinted with the morning sun already stabbing its way through the window. *Vile creature, miserable thing.* That’s when it happened. A fleeting window and a nasty thought as it crashed to the ground and split. It had been my responsibility for not more than two minutes and I had already destroyed it.

— —

It was a week before it happened, the changes. Some mused that it was a sign of the times, a new era, while Bill from next door said that things were the same, that it was just a sign of autumn coming.

Emily still hadn't quite forgiven me for breaking the sundial, and although footfall would always drop this late into the season, I could tell that there was a hint of blame in her tone. It was clear in the way she had stopped making me morning tea, offering to help with unboxing, telling the customers that I was her specialist when it came to the oils. But with just a week until closure, her view of me was irrelevant according to Tom. I knew that he was right but we'd done an entire summer together, she'd been like a sister to me at times, sharing a packet of Marlboros out back after a full day on our feet, through the heatwaves, the endless screaming, *happy season bullshit*.

Everything was changing. Collecting my bike from the harbour that night, even the steep road out of the village looked different, the fallen leaves, the empty bins. The dead badger was still there, halfway up, where it had been decomposing for more than three weeks. But the sun was much lower now, restricting me from seeing the rock beyond it. Crashing to the floor, my left shoulder took the brunt as my backpack slipped off. A young couple walked by but took no notice. Gravel came out of my arm, stained with blood.

— —

The warnings came on the final Friday. Some panicked whereas Lucy said that it was all a fuss over nothing, that it was just an autumn thing. As she wiped the waves off the chalkboard, I was trying to fix the gnomon back onto the gargoyle's face. Emily said that the insurance would cover it but it was taunting me. *Vulgar bitch*. I'd already had a thanks and that there might be shifts next summer but Lucy had her contract. I wasn't coming back, we both knew that.

By late afternoon, the wind picked up and howled down the street as the sun weakened, flickering pitifully against clouds that were too great a match for it. As I walked to the bike stand for the last time, I noticed a small boy crying beside his grandfather. The giant man consoled him, pointing at trawlers swaying wildly in the harbour. I had a tip for the sundial. It's almost fixed now, it will soon be ready to sit beneath the sun once again. But for now, the clouds are settling, the wind is carrying them.

— —

November dawn

Narrow steps line the rail to the beach. A silent landscape meets an eye and a tender call of rooks circles from above. High tide leaves a slit of sand, the air is cold and reckless. The trees on the cliff are stripped and unkempt, and the place that once sold bright things now sits empty beneath the rain.

It's early but I am late. The nearest waves dance up to me while those in the distance are only just forming. Autumn had been brutal. They say that this place was never meant for us, that we cannot survive here, that it's seasonal, transitional. The skies are broken but there is no light coming through. Five miles east sits a box with a rusted face inside, decayed and sadistic, waiting for the next round of sun.

Where I am going is darkness.

LAURA COONEY

Who's Afraid Of Little Old Me

Claire does that clichéd thing of pulling her collar up round her neck while she waits at the roadside in October's early and blistering sleet. You can see her, can't you? It's dark, it's a B-road, the smell of cow-shit still clings to the rural air though it's past midnight, the goblin hour, and it is fucking freezing. The only light for miles is the one that weakly stretches off her phone, her face a greying hue.

She's tired,

'look missus, let me go, eh?'

the voice pipes up from the back of the car.

'Who's afraid of little old me?' he says and he smiles this graveyard smile. Lucky if three of the yellow tombstones are complete to begin with.

'Davie, you know I can't, just sit there and please shut up,' she says, holding her phone to the sky as if wishing for God, and not just a 4G signal.

'Fucking H,' she mutters under her breath, 'fucking reception, fucking Auchterarder, fucking fuck this place.'

Course she'll be in the shit for this with the boss, out at night on a totally unofficial stakeout with no radio, no backup, no reception and one of Tommy Walker's prize fuck-wits in the back of her now broken down Hyundai. Perfect. Just perfect.

Maybe, she thinks, she should just let him go. Town is only about a 40 minute walk away. He can scarper a bit before she does and no-one would wake in the morning any the wiser. She'd be late to the morning meeting but would bring lattes and everyone would smile and forget she was late and that would be that. No questions asked. If not for one thing, this was a perfect plan.

Perfect. But for Tommy Walker's dead body in the boot of her car. Yeah, *that's fucked*, she thinks.

They're about a ten minute walk away from their final destination. Surely, between them they can carry Tommy to the reservoir. To look at Davie you'd wonder how his legs held him up, but it was the only sensible option that she could think of.

'Whit a fat bastard, eh?'

'Aye Davie, that we can agree on. No much farther now, here, at least the fat bastard'll no need his water-wings any mair, eh?' laughed Claire, Davie laughed.

'Here hen, I didnae ever learn to swim either.'

'Oh, did ye no,' she had guessed that, 'did you bring yours.'

Ah, how they both laughed. Claire knew changing her grammar, going native, that was the way to get the wee guy's trust. At the edge of the reservoir they held tight to each side of the rug. Swing. Tommy was gone.

She patted Davie's back.

'Thanks mate,' she said and she meant it. Grabbing him with both arms and tackling him over the cliff was sorrowful, but necessary.

As she surfaced from the long jump into the icy water she breathed against the unseasonable cold. One thought warmed her, man, at least she'd fucking learned to swim.

MADELINE ARMSTRONG

We're Not Really Here

Everything was sky blue: the polyester Man City shirt, itchy against my skin; the scarf that crackled static into my hair; the too-big bobble hat; even the wooden rattle that used to be yours.

We always took the same spot in the North Stand, to the left of the goal, in sight of the Kippax die-hards. Standing at first, then later in seats that flipped up with a bang every time I rose for a better view. No atmosphere any more, you moaned, but we still went.

I liked the football, but I liked being near you best, especially when you said I was more like a son than my brother Jack, who never wanted to come. Those words were like a warming cup of Bovril all week, back in our house where everything was a battle, even getting five minutes uninterrupted in the bog.

There must have been some sunny days but I only remember the times when dark descended before the game was out, and the smell of bonfires mingled with meat pie. I stamped life into numb feet and pretended my cloudy breaths came from cigarettes like the ones you used to chain smoke.

Seasons flashed by: a jinking run down the wing; inflatable bananas in electric-blue shirts; floodlights shining in my eyes; the smell of beer on your breath and the scrape of stubble against my cheek when we hugged, celebrating a goal.

You'd stand with your pipe-cleaner arms out wide, shouting *We are not, we're not really here*, your voice joining with thousands, rising and falling like a murmuration.

Surrounded by solid concrete, I never understood that chant. The here and now seemed pretty definite. Then in sixth form I discovered string theory and wondered if in some parallel dimension I had a different dad, one who spoke to me about something other than football.

After City left Maine Road, we stopped going. It wasn't the same, you said, and anyway I was off to university, with more important things to do with my Saturday afternoons.

Years flashed by: green-tinged lamplight in the library as dusk crept in; the sun in my eyes as I stood between you and Mum, clutching my graduation certificate; just married, confetti in my hair and Champagne fizzing through my veins.

Duty visits back home, ashamed of your poky terrace and Mum's knick-knack collection, the way you said tea instead of dinner. Bickering with Jack like we were still teenagers.

Crunching through drifts of brown leaves towards the hospital, where machines bleeped and your stubble scraped against my cheek as I leaned down to kiss you.

Sitting with Jack, fidgeting in plastic chairs. Searching for a topic of conversation other than death and alighting on football, our old standby. *D'you think City'll win the league this season?*

You turned your gaunt cheek away. *It doesn't seem important any more.*

Now I'm at Maine Road, nothing left except the centre circle, a lonely patch of green surrounded by new builds and leafless trees. People hurry by, hunched against the cold, but the sun's shining and the sky's pale blue, like the rest of the world. City shirts everywhere; not just Manchester, but London, America, even China and Japan, probably.

Only you can't see it; you're in the earth, covered in a blanket of golden rot.

I don't like to think about that. I'd rather imagine you in that parallel dimension, with the other me, still chanting *We're not really here*.

MADELEINE ARMSTRONG won the Hammond House short story prize in 2023, and has been published by Flash Fiction Magazine, Fussub, Hooghly Review, LISP, NFFD, Trash Cat Lit, Underbelly Press, Waffle Fried and WestWord. She's a journalist and runner, and lives in London with her husband, son and two cats.

REBECCA TIGER

Carapace

Sophie shoves gum in her mouth, one, two, three pieces. Gum juice rolls down her chin. The flavors - mint and aspartame - mingle. She doesn't love the taste. It's not about that. It's the freedom. No one scolds her, tells her she can't do it. During the summer, that is. When she's back in school, it's a light blue plaid skirt, knee socks, stiff shoes, a button-down white shirt that her mother has to bleach because Sophie cannot keep it clean.

But now, the break means unlimited gum. And whatever else interests her. This year, it's turtles. Sophie marvels at their contradictions. Hard on the outside, soft on the inside. She chews her fingernails, sometimes until they bleed. "What do you have to worry about?" her mother asks. Sophie's bedroom now houses her baby brother's crib. Sometimes she plays in the room's large closet, reading to her imaginary turtle, Rufus. Her father got her a copy of *Minn of the Mississippi* from the library. She learns that a turtle cannot regrow a limb. But a damaged shell might come back. Sophie eyes her stumpy nails with hope.

Appeals have been made for a real turtle to no avail. "Play with your baby brother!" her mother says, but he's not fun. His thick legs and swollen feet are an abomination. When he cries, his face turns the color of a tomato. And he cries a lot. For this reason, Sophie is almost happy when her mother says school is starting again soon.

She goes into the closet and breaks the news to Rufus that he's not real but that she'd give up her American Girl dolls to make him come alive. She is surrounded by Wrigley's wrappers that she stores in a Ziplock bag. She misses the freedom to chew gum, even as she puts a fresh piece in her mouth. In a year, her parents will take her to a psychiatrist to get her to stop saving things that normal people throw away.

At school, the desks are lined in rows. Sophie has graduated to first grade and can sense a big change coming with the cooler air. More is expected of her. She is sustained by sounds of approval from adults, even if she needs long breaks from them. This is what worries her. No closet. And no gum. Sophie fidgets in her seat, kicks her legs back and forth, chews the side of her mouth. She weighs the reprieve from her brother with this new configuration that feels like an initiation into a world she might not want to join. The balance is tipped in its favor when the teacher walks in carrying a shoe box. First grade comes with a class pet! This year, Mrs. Gaffney says, they will have a turtle. Sophie cannot believe her luck and wonders if her wishes made this happen.

Mrs. Gaffney puts the turtle in a small aquarium. Despite the name she's given it – Greenie – it's mud colored, with dark brown spots on its tiny head and beady eyes. The turtle drags itself across the rocky soil with slug-like legs. Sophie and her classmates take turns giving it food and water and cleaning its cage. The Friday before Thanksgiving break, Mrs. Gaffney asks for a volunteer to take Greenie home so he won't be alone for the week. Sophie's arm flies up before anyone else's. She is excited to show Greenie her house, her closet. She's undecided if she'll let her little brother pet him.

Sophie's father carries Greenie's cage up to her bedroom. He tells Sophie that if this visit is a success, Santa might bring her a turtle for Christmas.

Sophie puts a finger to her mouth and gnaws at loose skin, delicately peeling the cuticle back with her teeth. Mrs. Gaffney wrote in Sophie's mid-semester progress report that she was impressed by her diligence with Greenie. Mrs. Gaffney referred to her as "preternaturally sensitive."

Sophie feeds Greenie leaves of lettuce, which he devours. She lets him sniff a piece of Bubble Yum before she puts it in her mouth. She hopes Santa brings her a turtle who is actually green. Sophie's brother is now stumbling around the house on legs that resemble Greenie's, low to the ground and too bulbous for the load they carry. Her brother loses interest in things quickly, so he's barely paid attention to their new roommate.

This is the Thanksgiving that her mother decides she's old enough to use the beaters on the steaming potatoes that are in a metal bowl with a stick of butter and salt. Sophie feels almost grown, a trial pet and now this! She has some of the potato peels in her jean pockets as a reminder of this momentous day. When her mother asks her where her brother is, she shrugs; she is singularly focused on her task. She does hear her mother when she screams: "SOPHIE GET IN HERE!"

Sophie doesn't know how to turn the beaters off. When she puts them down, they bounce to the kitchen floor, leaving a trail of white gore on the counter and cabinets. She runs into her room. Her brother is sitting on the floor next to a hissing Greenie, a shard of Greenie's shell in his hand. Greenie is smearing blood on the beige carpet as he struggles to move. Sophie rushes to pick him up, but he sinks his sharp teeth into her finger. She yells at her brother: "What did you do?" Her brother starts sobbing. Sophie grabs Greenie from behind with two hands, his legs paddling the air as she puts him back in his cage. Her brother hiccups and struggles to breathe.

Sophie knows that her plans are ruined but also that her mother is watching. “It’s okay. It will grow back,” she says to her brother. She takes the piece of Greenie’s shell from his hands, to add to her collection of mementos she will later learn are called trash.

REBECCA TIGER teaches sociology at Middlebury College and in jails in Vermont and lives part-time in New York City. She writes on the long train ride to and from work. Her stories have appeared in *Bending Genres*, *BULL*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Pithead Chapel*, *trampset* and elsewhere. You can find her published stories at rebeccatigerwriter.com and on twitter and instagram @rtigernyc.

SCOTT MACLEOD

The Days Grow Short

Summer never ended like flipping a switch. It bled out slowly like a gunshot wound. Doc had seen almost 50 of them. Summers, not gunshots. Though he'd seen a few of those too.

Doc liked the end of August best. Most vacations were over. The crowds dwindled almost daily as they counted down their returns to the office. To the classroom. To Hell. By September 1st it was mainly the regulars. Retirees. Cancer jockeys. Laid out in neat rows like bacon.

Doc's own summertime had passed as well. He was the old man of the lifeguard stand. Couldn't grate onions on his abs anymore. Anheuser-Busch had seen to that. But he could still fit in his board trunks without threatening the seams. He still had that crown of hair. His famous mop. But now chalked with strands of grey.

Better the leaves turn than fall.

Soon it would be back to school. Kids would call him Mr. Cobb instead of Doc. To his face at least. They knew he'd never gone to med school. Certainly wasn't PhD material. Nobody could remember exactly how he'd gotten that nickname. But it stuck. Something pharmaceutical no doubt.

Really not much would change for Doc after Labor Day.

He'd still be selling ketamine to the same kids. All that really varied was that he'd be handing over bags of powder in the faculty parking lot instead of behind the board shop.

It was a little easier to do business on campus. Obviously less surf and sand to contaminate the product. And long pants made it easier to conceal. The armed resource officer did not pose the threat you might think. He was less awake and aware than the cops at the beachside Arby's.

Doc was not a political man. Or a math whiz. He taught woodshop and driver ed. But he could count grocery bags. And he knew when the same paycheck yielded fewer sacks. He actually got paid more by the park service for playing Baywatch than by the school district for helping future dropouts mold fruit bowls. That meant as the foliage changed color, his own green ebbed as well.

He'd always needed to supplement teaching with guarding.

And he'd needed to supplement guarding with his illegal side hustle.

The problems arose when beer prices got worse and worse and he decided this fall he needed to supplement his illegal side hustle with a little skim. Off the top.

That's where it went bad. That's when the calendar turned from Indian summer to icy cold in Doc's world. The wind howled and the trees went bare. Sundown accelerating.

The boss was like a good butcher. He didn't need a scale. He could tell if your envelope was light. By feel. Then he'd come for you. But he didn't come in person. He had a guy. Who he sent to problems. To end them.

Doc dug out his old lesson plan. Prepared to activate autopilot. Shifted gears to football season. Thought about who the Cowboys played opening week.

Turned out it wouldn't matter. He never saw the problem solver coming.

The Hebrew calendar concludes in September.

Sometimes autumn is not a season of change. Sometimes it's the end.

T. E. O'CONNOR

Burned Flowers Fallen

I don't remember much about the blast. A flash of light, a muffled bang in the distance, and then a rush of red-brown air. We never did find out who dropped the bomb. Could've been Russia, maybe the USA; perhaps it was a false flag attack from our own government. It sounds crazy, but then so does the whole situation. The mushroom cloud was far larger than it had any right to be. Buildings were gone in the blink of an eye as the city became a mostly-flat layer of rubble and dust between groves of trees tens of miles apart.

I'd been at a job interview on the day it happened. An office job at a recruitment company. Nothing fancy, I just wanted something to get me out of the house a bit now that Mum was starting to get over the worst of her heart problems. I'd been scraping by on carer's allowance for the last year, but I can't complain. It was money I needed to make sure she was ok.

I was crossing the road to get myself a well-earned coffee and slice of cake from one of those chain places with corporate-cosiness when I heard that faint, awful whistle. It was just the way that films always have it before a bomb lands, so much so that I assumed it was someone watching a video or a child with a toy.

It was only the flash and rumble that made me take it seriously. Luckily, a lorry had seen something I hadn't and swerved in front of me, careening into a row of parked cars and making a shield. I think that's the only way I made it, curled in a ball behind a few tonne-plus barriers so that only a wave of hot, aggressive air tore at my clothes from under them. The skin of the driver was vaporised by the time I'd pulled myself to my feet, a rictus grin mockingly pointing out that perhaps it was the living that were the unlucky ones.

But where was Mum?

I tried to put my thoughts in order and shake away the shock. Mum had just been turning a corner and was finally able to get dressed and use the stairs on her own, but it wasn't as if she had all her faculties back. My legs were wobbling, but miraculously I didn't seem to have any real injuries. Ground zero must have been far away, but the devastation wreaked on the area, and my skeletal friend showed how powerful it was.

Pulling myself to my feet, and without thinking, I ran unevenly for the metro stop. When I arrived there, the smell of cooked flesh was horrific and strangely mouth-watering. The tram sat at the platform but it wouldn't be moving any time soon. There were smoking corpses and skeletons polka-dotting the landscape. Shards of broken glass coated the floor between the towers like icing sugar on a powdered doughnut. I would have to make my way across the city on foot.

I'd noticed that, against all the odds, the trees placed at various points in the open spaces between buildings, whilst occasionally missing leaves or leaning angrily, were mainly still standing tall. Cars had been removed, people hurled into walls, but these gentle, innocent giants had no concern for such trivial matters like explosions.

I remembered the walks my mum had taken me on around the park in Buxton where I'd lived as a child. Her bending awkwardly to hold my mittened hand in the autumn breeze, eating ice cream despite the chill because it made her laugh to do so. We'd walk the whole way around, giving the trees names and quacking back at the cantankerous ducks in the stream, and giving them bread, despite their rudeness. And then do it all again moments later, just because we could. Those beautiful, endless days. The best ones were when she'd let us ride the little train. Two minutes around a small circle on a single bit of grass, but feeling like members of the royal family on tour as we waved to the less fortunate who had to use their legs to get around.

She'd always loved nature. When she'd retired, she had taken up art as a way to fill her days, but also as an excuse to go walking and find views and trees and leaves and rivers to paint. I'd told her that once she was better, we'd spend more days like those we'd had when I was small, and she could take her easel and make some new memories that could be shared with the family through her pictures. She'd made me promise that we would because that was what was keeping her going. *Don't be daft, of course we will, Mum!*

I'd somehow made it back to her street whilst lost in these thoughts. Worry struck as there were still bodies strewn on the pavement and crumbling, windowless buildings, even this far out of town. I started running, knees aching with each panicked step that hammered the ground. Eleven houses later, I turned into her drive. All was quiet and seemingly intact, save for two of the upstairs windows which had exploded inward. I cautiously tiptoed past her car, sat forgotten on the drive since her heart problems had started. Unlocking the door, I moved across the bottom floor, calling out for her to no avail.

The kitchen curtains wafted slightly, which was strange, as the glass seemed to be intact downstairs. The back door sat open wide, so I crept through into the small garden. There she was, stretched out on the grass, pale and seemingly unharmed, hand cradling a picturesque leaf. She wasn't breathing and cold to touch. I picked up the easel and added to the damp picture with my tears. It showed a woman and mittened-child next to a large tree, and beneath it, a single word.

Soon.

Born just outside sunny Wolverhampton, **T. E. O'CONNOR** moved to Sheffield after university and co-founded northern publishing house Northodox Press. Inspired by the sublime to the ridiculous, and all things subversive and off beat, Ted writes the sort of things you would likely only otherwise experience if you've eaten too much cheese.

ART



Taken by L. Huddleston

D. C. NOBES

Autumn Maple Leaves, High Park, Toronto, Canada



"Autumn Maple Leaves, High Park, Toronto, Canada" was taken in early November, just before the leaves fell, and before the cold November rains began.

D. C. NOBES is a physicist, poet, and photographer who spent most of his first 39 years in or near Toronto, Canada, then 23 years based in Christchurch, New Zealand, 4 years in China, and has since retired to Bali. His poems and art photographs have been widely published. IG: @sebon52

D. C. NOBES

Empty Muskoka Chairs, Autumn, Victoria, Canada



DCN

"Empty Muskoka Chairs, Autumn, Victoria, Canada" shows a trio of summer deck chairs on the shore in mid-October. The style of chair is called the Muskoka chair in Canada, but the Adirondack chair in the USA. Both Muskoka and Adirondack are cottage areas where city dwellers escape in the summer.

D. C. NOBES

Sunlit Autumn Birch, Isokyro, Finland



"Sunlit Autumn Birch, Isokyro, Finland" was taken in mid-October, soon after the leaves had dropped. The low autumn sun highlights the bare birch branches.

GP HYDE

Fences



A marshland in autumn looking towards factories on the South Bank of the Humber.

GP HYDE was born on Merseyside and now lives in Grimsby. He studied art at Goldsmith's and at the Royal Academy Schools. His fiction has been extensively published by Pure Slush. His poetry has been published by Black Bough, Hedgehog, Written Off, Lincs & Ink, the Dark Poets and voidspacezine.

GP HYDE Field



This was shot beside the A180, the main carriageway leading out of Grimsby. It shows an autumnal landscape against the non-stop rhythms of a motorway.

GP HYDE

Harvester



Although the harvest typically occurs during summer, I shot this image of a harvester. I then realised that it was mowing down the stubble from August's harvest.

JAMES DIAZ

Desperado's Waiting On The Pain



JAMES DIAZ is the author of four full length poetry collections, the most recent being, "Once More, Into The Light" (Alien Buddha. 2025.) They are the founding editor of Anti-Heroic Chic. Their most recent work can be found in One Art Poetry and Resurrection Mag.

JAMES DIAZ
Wild Things



JAMES DIAZ

"Your Dad Wasn't Always Like This, You Know".

"What Was He Like Then, Mom?" "Like The 4th of July. Your Daddy Was Like The 4th of July."



JILL ELOISE VANCE

Autumn



JILL ELOISE VANCE is a poet and interdisciplinary artist. Her work has appeared in Acid Bath Publishing, Pure Slush, Dirigible Balloon, Spilling Cocoa over Martin Amis, Full House Literary, Forge Zine, The Alchemy Spoon, Allegro Poetry, Chemical Inevitable, Celestite Poetry, Overtly Lit, The Hyacinth Review and Green Ink Poetry.

LAURIE AVADIS

Hibernation



LAURIE AVADIS' artwork and poetry have been featured in a number of magazines, including the front cover of the first issue of Cerasus Poetry magazine in 2024. Alongside their writing, they are a resident artist in three galleries and singer songwriter for The Nightingale Experience.

MIDE MILES

Life is long life the third mainland bridge



MIDE MILES is a Yoruba man from Osun State in Nigeria, who graduated from the University of Ilorin as a Performing Arts Student. He enjoys using his hands, photography, writing and creating arts are his favourite things to do. He has a sight for beauty and that's why he takes breath taking photos that resonate with him and an ample number of people. He loves creating and sharing his craft with the world hoping that it sparks something positive in them.

MIDE MILES

life on a free road, story of a bike man.



POETRY



Taken by Luke

BRADFORD MIDDLETON

A ROUGHER LIFE THAN MINE

I was wandering the streets of my youth long after they had gone
When, suddenly, a lightning bolt came crashing down striking
Me hard. A face, a face I hadn't seen in years, in decades, one
Of those few from the hell of secondary school who I'd called a
Friend, but as I veered on over and began talking as if no time had
Passed at all, the reaction I got suggested his life had derailed
Somehow even more than mine.

Blank eyes stared back at me until he raised his hand to suggest
Somewhere there was an inkling in the back of his mind, but as he
Moved on out of my life, perhaps never to be seen again, the only
Thought I could muster was Carl, oh Carl, how did it get so bad
For you?

BRADFORD MIDDLETON lives in Brighton, England. Recent poems have, or will shortly, feature at Jerry Jazz Musician Online, Beatnik Cowboy, Beach Chair Review, Mad Swirl, The Literary Underground, Dear Booze, Fixator Press and in The Good Press' The Paper. He's currently submitting his debut collection around the small presses.

D. L. HUSBAND

Pray For

The edge remains a constant –
I peer over its inviting oblivion. It yearns...

Do I yearn?

The brink – hot and stinking and L O U D

L O U D

L O U D

It's gross knowing once I loved it. It feels gross pretending to be above it.
But here we are
(cue nervous laugh)

Derision and self admonition appear to be a permanent position. A self fulfilling prophecy, loss appears to be where I get lost and linger obliviously.

Longing for its lonely, soothing, barren landscape.

Mist listing above rough heather moors. Drizzle and grey skies. Still we stand, us and the air damp while we mourn yesterday's hope.

Stagnating becomes asphyxiating while I'm waiting for me to be done waiting, self hating all the things I've nurtured and tended, propagated and procreated. Misappropriating moments for which I say I pray for –

I say I pray for –
say less, pray more.

D.L. 'DAN' HUSBAND is a North East born & bred writer, poet and performer. With two collections (HMVI & HMV II) published alongside a score of individual pieces in various publications, he pens poetry and prose with acid in the inkwell & compassion in the heart. Unflinching writing and performances at various venues and Fringe festivals have made him a stellar addition to the scene discussing addiction, homelessness, life, love, growth and all that lies in between. Get after his work @husbandmaterialpoetryandprose

DERYCK N. ROBERTSON

Deposit

Someday,
hopefully a long time in the future,
my children will have to deal with
my, and my wife's, social media accounts.

They will comb through
decades of canned birthday wishes,
familiar photos of vacations,
and re-Tweets.

They will also come across
our text messages and
shared memes and reels.

So, in the spirit of openness
and pre-planning, does
anyone know the name of a good
therapist that will take a deposit?

DERYCK N. ROBERTSON lives and creates in Peterborough/Nogojiwanong, ON where he is a retired elementary teacher. Recent work has appeared here and there, including MIDLVLMAG, Radix, Epistemic Literary, and The Hooghly Review. He can usually be found in the stern of his canoe in Algonquin Park or sitting around the campfire drinking a maple roast coffee. He is the EIC of Paddler Press and has a couple of songs out on Spotify. Find him online: deryck.ca and [@Canoe_Ideas](https://twitter.com/Canoe_Ideas).

ERIN EMILY ANN VANCE

Abecedarian for a Once-Feral Child

And all at once I feel I've
Become something
Caustic—what happened to the
Determined little girl with twigs in her hair,
Eager to spit and run and
Fell the elm trees in the back
Garden, chicken scratch thighs clinging to
Hope and a paint-chipped fence post?
If at thirty I am full up of this daily living,
Jettisoned from the life I imagined,
Knowing that twenty years ago I
Mapped out my future with a sharpie on my bedroom wall
Night-terrors clung to my hair but I never stopped
Opening myself—if at thirty I am so distant from that
Precocious child, how far will I drift by fifty? I fancied myself a

Queen of the fairies that lived on the
Shores of the creek behind our house, the
Underbrush at the edge of the fields my kingdom, the
Varicose veins of clay that ran through the dirt my
Weapons—now I scrub the sink after dinner and
X-ray my old diaries to get to the root of my
Yearning, twenty-year-old nightmares resurrecting at night like
Zombies of the women I thought I'd become.

ERIN EMILY ANN VANCE is a Canadian poet based in the Orkney Islands. Her first collection of poetry, *A History of Touch*, was published by Guernica Editions in 2022.

ETHAN CLARK

Seasonal Awareness Disorder

I am the pumpkin rotting outside my front door

Carved and now caved in

I am sniffed, licked and ogled at

I used to have a face once.

I am the pile of leaves that are stuck in my gutters

Once bright and vivid, reduced to mush

I stew in my rainwater and frost

Clogging all movement.

I am the sore throat my friends caught

I permeate the air, make the back of their throat

Itch. Coughs, snot and sneezes

Punctuate the weeks that follow.

I am the moon rising ever earlier
I am your loss of daylight
I am the reason my sleep is fucked
And I have to be up in 4 hours.

I am the frost that is attached to my car,
the pipes, the garden and
The visibility of my breath
I am what makes you shiver in the morning.

I welcome myself as a needed change of pace
From the incessant heat and smoothness before.

ETHAN CLARK (Any/All), is a writer from North Wales, studying Creative Writing at York St. John. They have been published in Vita and The Woolf Literary and Arts Journal, Sprawl Magazine and served as an editor on the 2024 Beyond The Walls Anthology.

EVE LEE

how to leave a home

it takes three days to strip a house
naked: skin & bone (*paint*) & (*tiles*)
 paintings are the first to leave, easy
 your thirteen personalities, neat in frames
 no longer necessary for the remaining days
hours, of keeping yourself fed & washed

next, bless your plants with another house
(still fresh) with air of new beginning
 hope smells like oxygen, long-forgotten by
 your loyal, weary housemates who have
 seen too much: *heartbreaks - drunken -*
manic - laughter - depression - sunken - mess

finally the clothes (*alter egos*)
paper skins / past lives / shed
from / tired shell / of body
relics / shoes / footprints
trails / not walked
possibilities / not chosen

if wardrobes were carousels
 this suitcase is a coffin of seeds

EVE LEE (they/them) is a queer migrant poet who has made homes in London and Singapore. They write about home, healing and humanity through a decolonial and existential lens. Eve's work is featured in various queer, global majority centred spaces. Connect with Eve on Instagram @suitcaseofpoetry.

EWEN GLASS

Crescent Bar

The wood panels have a ‘complicated relationship with themselves’ by osmosis; splashes of alcohol, late Saturday tears, midweek wakes agreed with the ownership. For me, it’s the crescent window above the door, a lighted half-moon that keeps our eyes down until the door opens and it disappears and our lips part for the kiss of future or else invective, interloping light to soft black self-pity. It’s a wonder these stools are so far from the ground; a history of broken noses and fingers before a cause of death is discerned: shadow. It’s not said but at the midweek wake agreed with the ownership we begin to understand. We drink to her and though we are all thinking of ourselves say let her find just enough light above the door.

EWEN GLASS (he/him) is a screenwriter and poet from Northern Ireland who lives with two dogs, a tortoise and a body of self-doubt; his poetry has appeared in the likes of Poetry Scotland, Abridged, HAD and Belfast Review.

FAITH-ANNE BELL

The Leaves Changed

the week he died—

Forever 41

I missed the autumn spectacle.

It was cold & rainy

If I recall.

&, if not, it should have been.

I missed our black gum's

bright red kisses.

I missed our sugar maple's

orange parade.

I missed our river birch's

yellow display.

Our pumpkins, still grinning

with Halloween's pageantry,

sank deep into the earth

as if swallowed into November's gut.

The leaves changed

the week he died

&, almost,

almost overnight,

my world became winter.

FAITH-ANNE BELL received a BA in English Literature from UMBC. Faith-Anne has forthcoming poems appearing in Stripes Literary Magazine. Following the death of her mother & her husband within a year's time, Faith-Anne has rededicated herself to her writing.

GP HYDE

Taste

‘This way,’ you say and lead me through
the fence. I follow you into the glade
where trees are tended for the herbal bark.

‘Stand here,’ you say.
I look upon their naked bodies,
flayed, red-raw, denuded of their gnarled
and greying sheaths. We slip away,
follow our footsteps back inside.

We sit. I bite into a cinnamon roll
and taste the spice that’s sweet
as an apple tree branch on an autumn bonfire.

GP HYDE was born on Merseyside and now lives in Grimsby. He studied art at Goldsmith’s and at the Royal Academy Schools. His fiction has been extensively published by Pure Slush. His poetry has been published by Black Bough, Hedgehog, Written Off, Lincs & Ink, the Dark Poets and voidspacezine.

JD CLAPP

Bar Stool Elegy

Before the harvest
Marking time
Scribbling this barstool
Elegy on
A tear-stained napkin
For seasons lost,
Sins forgotten then
Remembered
Under that big moon
Double fisting
Doubles
Lucidly
Dreaming of pagan
Places and those
Fucking demons
Chasing...
Scrambling on
River stone
Carved by the
Great flood
Waiting on the
Fall.

JD CLAPP is a writer and poet based in San Diego, CA. He is the author of two short story collections--Poachers and Pills (Cowboy Jamboree, 2025) and A Good Man Goes South (Anxiety Press, 2024). His debut novel, Grit Before Grace (Cowboy Jamboree) will be published in the fall of 2026.

JOHN FINDURA

THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT I CAN CLOSE MY EYES BUT THE WATER MUST WATCH IT ALL

She said I knew the water better than myself,
better than the Lord's Prayer. I agreed.
My great-grandfather sailed that briny road,
put down a mutiny with one indifferent pull of a trigger,
waged war on everything, including himself. Come October
I don't go into the water, only lie awake at night
staring at pictures of waves, calculating their heights,
the weight of each individual crest. One day I will
say a prayer and return to the water. It will cleanse me,
but of what I don't know.

JOHN FINDURA is the author of the poetry collection *Submerged* (2017) and the chapbook *Useful Shrapnel* (2022). His poems appear in journals such as *Copper Nickel*; *Fourteen Hills*; *Fugue*; and *Mid-American Review*. He lives in New Jersey with his wife and daughters.

JOSHUA WALKER

Last Bloom

The chrysanthemums lean,
petals curling inward
like fists that gave up mid-swing.
I watch them rot slow,
damp with frost,
a calendar no one flips.
You told me once
hope is perennial—
but even perennials die back,
even their roots forget the way up.
I kneel in the soil,
fingertips black with mildew,
and dig for the promise
you swore was buried there.
Nothing but worms,
slick with hunger,
threading the silence.
The flowers collapse in themselves,
and I can't tell
if the season killed them,
or if my hands did—
leaving them thirsty,
while I believed in resurrection.
Hope does not resurrect.
It folds.
It withers.
It is already gone.

JOSHUA WALKER writing as The Last Bard, is a poet and storyteller whose work navigates the fragile edge between beauty and collapse. He explores human vulnerability, mental landscapes, and the grit of everyday life with unflinching honesty and dark, surreal imagery.

LEE FRASER

Winging It

The baby is out but you are still forming
 your
 cocoon:
 advice column
 shreds, leaves from
 trending parenthood
 books, family tree twigs
 that you realise don't hold
 to threadbare social fabric,
 but metamorphosis is not
 optional. Deconstruct
 your surroundings
 & internal world;
 pray it doesn't
 all wind up
 hollow
 or tar.

LEE FRASER is from Aotearoa New Zealand, and was a field linguist in her 20s. Now in her 40s, she uses poetry for nerding out about life's fascinating details, for emotional archaeology, and for comic relief, sometimes simultaneously. Some of her 45 published/forthcoming pieces are at leefraserpoetry.com

LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO

Hallowe'en Masquerade in New Orleans

"Legend has it, this beast now stalks the narrow alleyways of this very French Quarter."
— "Werewolf in New Orleans (Monsters Are Real)" by Jesse Byrd, 2018

Invited to a monster ball, I balked.

My suitcase, crammed with tourist clothes, yawned wide.

Yes, I wore caution like a uniform.

The concierge suggested Rue Dauphine

For costume rentals — but this shop looked bare

One day before the 31st. "Don't leave!"

Who's there? I heard a voice: "Quick! Come downstairs!"

Reality was ripped to shreds by what

Appeared: a werewolf get-up, fur so soft

I dared to try it on. A perfect fit.

"How much?" No one replied. *What sort of game*

Is this? No matter how I tried, the pelt

Adhered to me — became my second skin.

Complaints were useless. Speech turned into howls.

LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO. Native New Yorker. Poet. Writer. Dramatist. In 2024 LindaAnn LoSchiavo had three poetry books published; two titles won multiple awards. Forthcoming: "Cancer Courts My Mother" and "Vampire Verses."

OWEN TOWNEND

Pale Thumb

You walked away, boarded a bus, mingled with midday strangers. A passenger surrounded by laughter. An audience for your silence.

The appointment passed but the news remained, a numbness turned to a raw pain, an outcome still within you for four more stops. Then you brushed the bell with a pale thumb and disembarked to cracked pavement and more to come.

Each step unsteady, fainter than the last, faltering as they led you home. Up the doorstep, through the threshold to the hallway where we called your name.

Where you finally shared. Where your deep-down truth became our surface shame.

OWEN TOWNEND is a writer of short speculative fiction and poetry inspired by thought experiment and wordplay. He lives in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, England, UK. You can find him on Instagram - @owt441.

PAUL CALLUS

An Autumn Haiku

gale-force autumn wind -
she gathers the pain
of aborted fruit

PAUL CALLUS is a retired teacher who lives in Malta, Europe. He has been active in the literary field for around 50 years. He writes poetry, short stories, and lyrics for songs, mostly in English, Maltese, and Italian. He has been published in various anthologies, journals and online sites.

PETER DEVONALD

Autumn Soul

Uneven as heartbreak, it stole another year away,
all the promises of spring caught in the icy wind,
forlorn trees bend double, a striptease to fragility,
we still wear our T-shirts long after it is sensible,
clinging to the possibilities of summer, wishing
for a little longer in our make-believe utopia,
have to wake up now the leaves are browning,
face reality as the holidays are over, bitter taste
of acrid disappointment once again, a failure to
fulfil even the remotest fragment of our potential,
bitter and twisted as the falling flowers, spiralling
into disenchantment, streets will be empty soon,
anxious looks of gloom to grey glowering skies,
big coats and masks to hide our growing ennui,
another year, another sigh, we wasted so much time
already, it all passes so fast, clinging on to the fragile
promises of youth, blind assurances all so damning
now, watching yet another blizzard of leaves, fore-
shadowing of so much worse, wallowing in the
stunning auburns, reds and rosy reminiscences,
another transformation, more to follow, we mask
our regrets with hat and scarf and kick leaves
as children do, a recollection of you, passing.

Stockport based **PETER DEVONALD** is a multi-award-winning poet published extensively including Broken Sleep, six Broken Spine anthologies, Abridged, Alchemy Spoon and Dreich. Winner Broken Spine Readers' Choice Award 2025, Loft Books 2024, Waltham Forest, two HoH's, runner-up Shelley Memorial and N2tS. Nominations Forward Prize, two BotN and Children's Bafta.
<https://linktr.ee/pdevonald>

RACHEL BURROWS

Autumn Terms

For thirty years of her adult life
 she has collected conkers – heralds of a new school year.
I'll show you something, she always whispers,
that no one's ever seen before!
 And they ooh and aah as she splits the shell.
 Precious things.
 They take it in turn, to hold and feel her wonder and joy.
 There were strings when she started.
 Battles and bruises, winners and losers.
 The conker police came and said no.
 Academy rules. A table displays other nuts,
 red berries, her yearn for autonomy.
 Loaded high in her contraband tray
 – some conkers are pierced.
 She's bored holes and left laces,
 for small fingers to explore.
 She'll have to take photos.
 Evidence of something. Evidence of wonder?
 The tablet trembles as she ticks who felt it.
 Takes some photos of fine motor skills.
 Her glasses slip and she can't find the log-in
 and passes it on to younger eyes.
 When she leaves at last a darkened school,
 she addresses a slug on the six-foot fence.
I'll tell you something, no one's ever heard before.
I fucking hate conkers now!

RACHEL BURROWS' writing features in Northern Gravy, Motherhood Uncensored, Tiny Wren, 60-Odd-Poets and upcoming anthologies from The Broken Spine and Hedgehog Presses. She has been nominated for The Pushcart and Best Small Fictions Prize. Her children's poetry appears in numerous publications, and she was shortlisted for Cheshire Novel Kids Prize 2025.

SAM BARTLE

Turmoil

Where falling rain meets dusky skies,
Steering, by stormy gale.
A turmoil rests in vacant eyes,
Peering, beyond the veil.

So troubled in an empty gaze,
On dark approaching night.
The relentless rain falls and sprays,
In wind and dwindling light.

Please, if time does remain
To give my heart, and make amends,
Let me find once again
The warmth of lovers, and of friends.

Gloom, in sorrowful episodes
Labours for expression.
Where wheels won't turn on broken roads
Turmoil, finds its session.

SAM BARTLE is from East Yorkshire, has been published widely, performs regularly at open mic and local festivals, and works on visual arts commissions. His suite of nine space poems, 'The Planetary Ennead', was published in March 2023, and his debut collection, 'Emergent Dreams' was published in 2024 by Alien Buddha Press. In his work life he holds a Distinguished Service in Archives Award from the Archives Records Association (UK & Ireland) and is a shortlisted content creator in the Digital Culture Awards from Arts Council England. You can read more of his poetry at www.poetinverse.com

SCOTT MCLANE

Worst Kind of Days

It's usually on the worst kind of days
that I miss her most
smoke-thick Santa Ana wind days,
air she could never breathe with ease.

I choke on guilt
just inhaling her memory,
as if every breath today
borrows from what her lungs once lacked

But I would trade any phone booth
hero, for one more moment of her
smile. She could stop time
with her head on my shoulder.

Her presence—
a quiet superpower,
an absence that defeats me
on the worst kind of days.

SCOTT MCLANE is a poet, gringo girl-dad, special education teacher, and former coach in East Los Angeles. As a person of faith and grief, he writes from the ache of losing his youngest daughter, the love of being an adopting household, and the long echoes of growing up as a child of divorce. These layered stories shape his voice, often circling themes of presence, absence, and the fragile ways love endures.

WENDY WESTLEY

Untimely

Leaves no longer offer their golden bounty
but go from forest green to molding spots.
Twigs shower like unrefreshing rain, and
some boughs creak and threaten untimely death.

Time and nature are out of sorts,
Summers scorch, and desiccate even the deep rooted.
It is not your autumnal blessing but the weary earth's
dire warning that all is out of synch.

There will be no gentle invitation to winter
or joy on soft nights lit by bonfire and pumpkin lanterns.
Only bleak promises of more grim surprises
as nature is scarred by stupidity and human greed

WENDY WESTLEY was a successful nurse and midwife for many years in the NHS, England, and now writes short stories and poetry in retirement. She belongs to a creative writing group and has had her poetry published in poetry journals and magazines: Pulsar Poetry webzine, Amethyst Review, Spirit Fire Review. Underbelly Magazine, The Seventh Quarry Press. Her first book 'Sun hats & staying home' was launched on March 1st 2025 in the West Midlands.



Taken by Hayden Lawrence

**Thank you for reading once again—
and thank you to everyone who
contributed.**

- *The Underbelly Team*